

KASHMIR REVISITED

BY

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(With six plates)

My first two visits to Kashmir were made during the last war, in 1944 and 1945. Bird photography, during these war years, was difficult. My camera was old and the lenses barely adequate for the work. The films (hoarded one pack at a time over many months) were of ancient vintage, long past their expiry date, and sometimes working at less than one-quarter their rated speed. Shortage of transport made travel an adventure, and I now marvel at the prodigious exertions I sometimes underwent in order to photograph a bird; for instance, I once bicycled, loaded down with equipment, from Srinagar to Woyil Bridge and back in one day—a distance of 30 miles—in order to photograph Jerdon's Little Ringed Plover. Fortune was generous in her rewards that day: not only did I get pictures of the Ringed Plover, but I also photographed a Common Sandpiper at its nest, and, as a final gift from heaven, an Osprey dropped a half-eaten fish into my lap.

The richness and variety of bird-life in Kashmir made me long for better equipment, fresh films (and plenty of them—not the score or so film-packs with which I was then eking out my photographic existence), and the use of a car. 'When the war is over', I said to myself, (prefacing these thoughts with a hackneyed phrase), 'I will return'.

I did return, but not until the war had been over for 5½ years. On the morning of May 31st, 1951, my wife and I stepped out of the Frontier Mail at Amritsar to be greeted by Sálím Ali and Roy Hawkins, (of the Oxford University Press, Bombay), who had come by station-waggon. Our baggage was of Himalayan proportions. The list of photographic stores alone was impressive: between Sálím and myself we had seven cameras, and, in addition, I had brought along a heavy high-speed flash equipment, batteries, developing tanks for three different types of films, hundreds of rollfilms and packs, chemicals sufficient to develop the lot, and a multitude of odds and ends. A trio of railway station officials at Aritsar, scenting big game, pounced upon us, and, quoting rules and regulations of the existence of which we had not the faintest idea, extracted Rs. 87 before they would let us go.

The journey to Srinagar may be passed over quickly. When, on the morning of June 2nd, we stood on the far side of the Banihal Pass and looked down on to the fair Vale of Kashmir, a dream which I had dreamed for so long had at last come true. I was back in Kashmir again and two months of bird photography stretched ahead. I strained at the leash to get to work in earnest. It was to be more than a week before real work in fact began.

We frittered away the days in Srinagar. For various reasons we were unable to get the houseboat out of the Dalgate Canal to Ganderbai where we had planned to make our first onslaught on the birds.

Kashmir had been starved of visitors for several years, and any visitor in the summer of 1951 found himself the object of the furious attention of every water-borne salesman. The long-drawn battle cry of 'Salaam Sahib . . . ' greeted anyone who had the temerity to appear in the sitting-room of his house-boat. Nothing would dampen the ardour of these enthusiasts. Cheerful Chippendale's good cheer was simply inescapable, and Suffering Moses was more suffered than suffering. The words of a popular song say: 'Shut the door, they're coming in by the window, Shut the window, they're coming in by the door': how well they applied to life in a houseboat in the Dalgate Canal in the summer of 1951! We were thankful when at last we were able to escape to the quiet of Ganderbal.

But before I leave the salesman, there is one story of an ingenious sales approach which deserves to be recorded. Sálím and I were walking one evening back to Dalgate from Nedou's Hotel, after having parked the car. A little kingfisher settled on the prow of a houseboat, bobbing up and down as if suffering from an acute attack of hiccups. We stopped and watched it, wondering what it would do next. Soon a smooth looking gentleman who, in his turn, had been watching us, sidled up to Sálím and said, 'You know what that bird is, sahib?'

Sálím (archly).—'A water bird?'

Smooth gentleman.—'No, sahib.'

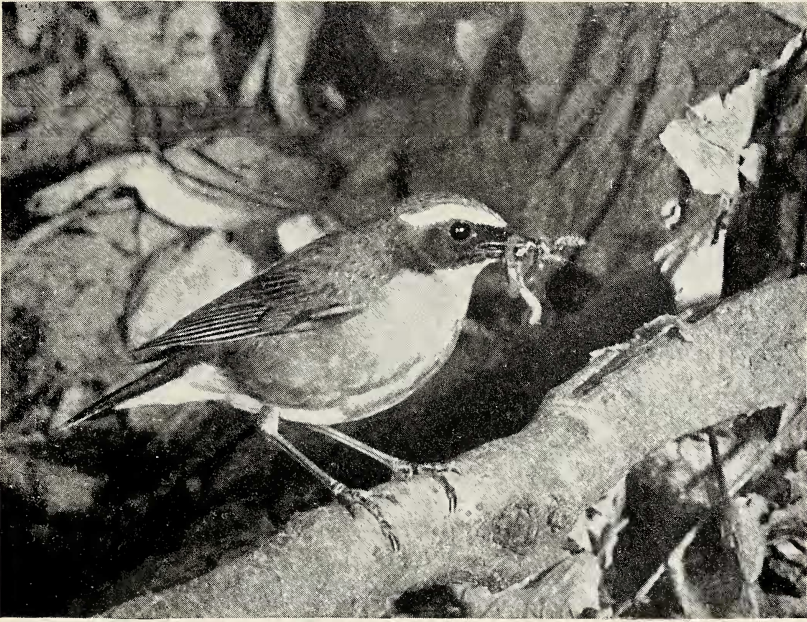
Sálím.—'A blue bird?'

S. G.—'No, sahib. I tell you what he is. He is a kingfisher and sits there to wait for fish. I know because I have fifty men who paint his picture every day. Come and visit my factory (producing visiting card). Just near here. See, only, don't buy'.

We couldn't object, of course. How could we? No ornithologist could possibly object if he gets the bird.

I had managed to photograph two interesting birds before we reached Ganderbal on June 13th. The first was a memorable encounter with Scully's Wood Owl. I spent an entire night on the roof of a thatched hut making my first attempts to photograph with the high-speed flash. The birds were infrequent visitors, and in the small hours of the night, standing up within the tiny confines of my hide, my head began to nod. Twice I managed to save myself just in time before I fell off the roof. At just after midnight I decided to come down to earth, but the night became bitterly cold, and lying on the ground under the trees, I found it was too cold to sleep. The shikaris borrowed mattresses from a nearby village and spread them over me. They also lent me a blanket which smelt heavily of wood smoke. I slept fitfully for a short spell, then climbed into my hide again to wait for the owls. It was a long night during which the owls only came back to their nest twice. I got some pictures but they were not good ones.

I also got more than I bargained for. At the dead of night the blanket and the mattresses yielded up their denizens, and for several



Male Bluechat (*Larvivora brunnea*). Chandanwari 9,000 ft.



Author

Female Bluechat (*Larvivora brunnea*). The bird which took no notice of the Stuffed Owl! Pahalgam 7,000 ft.



A pair of the Largecrowned Willow-wren (*Phylloscopus occipitalis*). Chandanwari 9,000 ft.



Author

Jerdon's Accentor (*Prunella s. jerdoni*) with nest in dwarf juniper. Astanmarg at 11,000 ft.

weeks afterwards, I carried on my stomach and my arms the marks of their midnight feasting. When dawn came I left my abode in the tree and strolled back to the river to meet Sálím and 'Hawk'. On the way I passed a cherry orchard where some peasants were gathering ripe cherries and, joining them, I made my breakfast off the tree, swallowing with surprising speed more than a pound of the delicious fruit.

The other encounter was with a pair of Blue Rock Thrushes who had their nest in an old building on the slopes of the Hariparbat Fort. The birds were very tame, so tame indeed, that Sálím called them 'the obliging couple'. We worked under most comfortable conditions in a large hide into which two people could, and did, go. Not unnaturally it became known as the 'double bed'. I got some quite good pictures.

It was not, however, until we got to Ganderbal that work really began in earnest. Ganderbal is the perfect head-quarters from which to make excursions down the Sind River to the Anchar Lake and the jhil at Shalabug. The country on each side of the river is also rich in bird life and we spent a very busy 15 days.

On the 14th of June it had rained nearly the whole day, but on the following morning we woke to clear skies and fresh snow on the mountains of the Pir Panjal range. The dawn laid rosy fingers on these gigantic peaks, lending them a soft beauty both alien and unexpected.

It was a good day for photography. A pair of shrikes, feeding a young Piedcrested Cuckoo, added their pictures to the portrait gallery. Cuckoos of both species (Piedcrested and Common) were plentiful. They shouted their heads off in a frenzy of passion and it seemed impossible that the nest of any potential foster-parents could possibly have escaped their attention. The shrikes and Golden Orioles both attacked them, the latter persistently and viciously.

The next day I spent photographing a pair of hoopoes, using high-speed flash equipment. A note in my diary for that day reads, 'Spend the afternoon developing films. Hoopoe results look very promising'. The hoopoe picture reproduced in my article on speedflash photography [Vol. 50 (4); p. 785] has, I am glad to say, proved very successful in International Photographic Exhibitions.

Bird after bird fell to our cameras—Little Bittern, Paradise Flycatcher, Great Reed-warbler, Golden Oriole, Paddy Bird, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Whitecheeked Bulbul, Swallow, European Bee-eater, etc. These were busy days, and sometimes I got up as early as 5.30 in the morning and processed films until late into the night. Sálím, aided by my bearer, helped with the washing. Films processed the day before and left to dry during the night, were always examined critically through a magnifying glass the next morning. These sessions became known as 'post-mortems' and always began with Sálím saying in a businesslike voice, 'Now then!'

The weather was not always kind to us and more than the usual amount of rainfall for the time of year resulted in many cold nights. The temperature once fell to 59°F.

My wife, a bird-photographer, so she said 'by marriage', found the excitement of a pair of ornithologists infectious and took to photo-

graphy also. She learned to develop her own films and came up with a picture of a male Paradise Flycatcher of which no photographer need be ashamed. I reproduce it in plate IV because, I must confess, I did not succeed in getting as good a picture myself.

On Thursday, June 28th, our houseboat began its journey back to Srinagar. Owing to high waters, it was not until three days later that we were able to reach our destination. Both my wife and I were by then suffering from dysentery and glad enough to be able to quit the houseboat. We accepted with thankfulness Miss Helen Stavrides's invitation to stay with her in her delightful cottage at Dalgate. There we enjoyed with undisguised pleasure the luxury of good food, clean surroundings, a beautiful garden, and the pleasant company of our hostess.

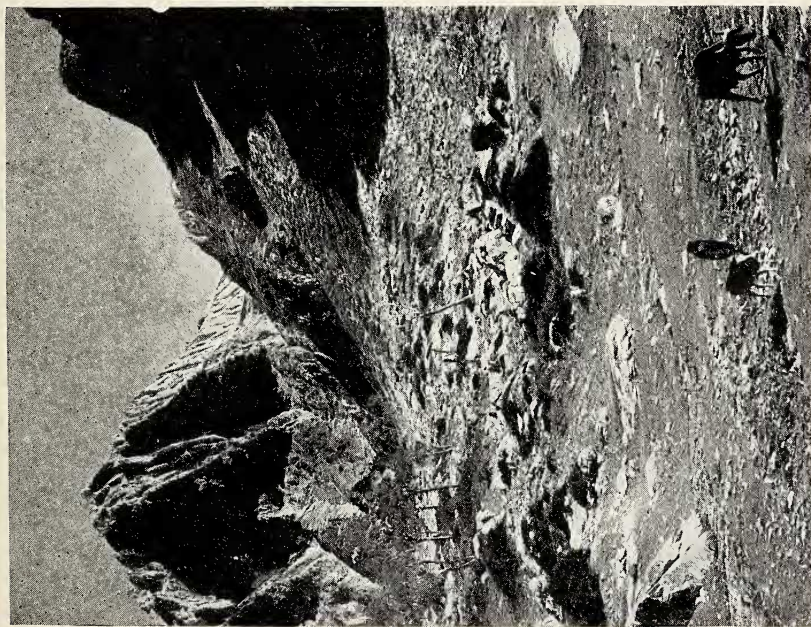
We had planned to leave for Pahalgam on the 1st of July, but decided to postpone our departure by one day. Rain on the following morning prevented movement and it was not until Tuesday, July 3rd, that we sent the servants and the luggage off by bus. Despite the threat of more rain, Sálím and I followed in the station-wagon on the Wednesday morning. My wife joined us several days later. The weather continued to be unkind and the cold made living under canvas far from pleasant. On our third night at Pahalgam the temperature fell to 46°F. It was to fall even lower than that during our stay in the high mountains, and at Astanmarg (11,000 ft.) the mercury reached a record low of 39°F.

The photographing of birds of course went on with little interruption—Stonechat, Plumbeous Redstart, Bluechat (♀ only) and Cinnamon Sparrow had their portraits more or less successfully recorded.

We thought we would have a little fun with the Bluechats and put a stuffed owl near their nest to see what effect this would have. The female took no notice whatever of the owl, except for a very brief moment of recognition when she hovered with an evident show of distress in front of the stuffed bird. After this, she entirely ignored it, and even when I placed it in her normal line of approach to the nest she still took no notice but went her customary way, literally brushing the owl, as she hopped past! The male appeared only once after the arrival of the owl, but instead of attacking the intruder he dived repeatedly and viciously at his mate as she searched for food on the ground. The female, mistaking these no doubt unusual cave-man tactics as a sign of affection, flirted her wings, raised her tail and uttered a short snatch of song. After this one visit the male never came near the nest again, although his explosive little song could be heard coming from a nearby tree.

Birds of different species differ greatly in their reaction to the sudden appearance of a hide. Although the male of this first pair of bluechats never summoned up enough courage to come to the nest, the male owner of a second nest which I later photographed at Chandanwari, was so intent on feeding his offsprings that he continued to feed them, even when my shikari was seated in full view only 4 feet away. The hen, however, was in this instance much more shy and elusive.

After a week at Pahalgam we moved our camp up to Chandanwari (9,000 ft.) on the East Liddar.



The Terminal Moraine, Astanmarg, 11,000 ft.



Author

Author and Sálím Ali. (Note Sálím Ali's cow-eaten coat).